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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/31/2018  
TAGS: PGOV PREL FI UK  
SUBJECT: PLANNED MILITARY PARADE AND SINK FEIN COUNTER-DEMONSTRATION  
PROVOKE CONTROVERSY

CLASSIFIED BY: Susan Elliott, Consul General, Belfast.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: British Ministry of Defence plans to hold a welcome home parade November 2 in Belfast for troops from the Royal Irish Regiment (RIR) returning from Afghanistan. Sinn Fein (SF) and dissident republican groups announced that they plan to hold separate counterdemonstrations on the same day. SF President Gerry Adams told the Consul General that the SF protest march will be peaceful. The Consul General asked Adams to consider changing the route of the SF march to avoid the gathering places of loyalist supporters of the RIR and dissident republican groups. Adams agreed to consider the request and on October 31 SF announced they had decided to change the route of their march to completely avoid areas near the loyalists and dissident republicans. On the same day, in order to diffuse the tensions, the Ministry of Defence cancelled its planned fly over of military aircraft and announced that troops will not carry weapons during the parade. PSNI Deputy Chief Constable Paul Leighton told the Consul General that the dissident republican group EIRIGI had not officially informed the PSNI and the Parades Commission of its plans to hold a march. As a result the PSNI considers the EIRIGI march to be illegal and will arrest anyone trying to participate. End Summary.

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MILITARY PLANS WELCOME HOME PARADE IN BELFAST  
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¶2. (SBU) In mid-July, the British Military announced plans to hold a welcome home parade and church service in Belfast for Royal Irish Regiment (RIR) troops returning from Afghanistan. The Belfast City Council agreed in September to host a civic reception for the troops, even though politicians from the Nationalist parties opposed the plan. Nationalist members of the Belfast City Council from the SDLP and SF plan to boycott the reception attended by soldiers, their families, and Unionist supporters of the RIR.

¶3. (SBU) Initially planned as full military march with weapons and military aircraft flying over the parade, on October 31, Major General Chris Brown announced that in order to reduce tensions, the RIR troops would be unarmed. He also cancelled the military aircraft fly over of the parade. In addition, the RIR's band will not play regimental music nor will the RIR carry regimental colors. Several Unionist politicians, including Ian Paisley Jr of the DUP and Danny Kennedy of the UUP, have publicly expressed their unhappiness with the Gen. Brown's announcement.

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SINK FEIN JUSTIFIES MARCH  
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¶4. (C) SF announced plans in mid-October to stage a counter demonstration on the same day as the military parade. SF President Gerry Adams termed the British Ministry of Defence's decision to hold a military parade "totally unacceptable."

Adams also blamed Secretary of State Shaun Woodward for allowing the parade to proceed. NOTE: Woodward's staff told Consulate that he did not feel comfortable asking SF to change their plans. END NOTE. Adams stated publicly that victims of British troop actions in Ireland would be offended by a military parade.

Adams and SF supporters have also said protest march also reflects Sinn Fein's opposition to wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

¶ 15. (C) In a meeting October 30, Adams assured the Consul General that the SF demonstration would be peaceful. The Consul General raised police concerns that route of the SF march would intersect with both dissident republicans and loyalist supporters of the military. Adams admitted he had not focused on the potential problem regarding the routing of the march. He said he would recommend that SF modify the route because he did not want any violence. SF officials contacted Consulate Belfast and Embassy Dublin on the morning of Oct 31 to advise that SF decided upon a new route which would place them nowhere near the loyalists and dissident republicans.

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DISSIDENT REPUBLICANS COULD CAUSE VIOLENCE  
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¶ 16. (C/NF) EIRIGI, a dissident republican group based in Dublin, announced plans to hold its own demonstration on November 2. PSNI Deputy Chief Constable Paul Leighton advised Consul General the police believe up to 200 dissidents, many bussed in from Dublin, may try to participate in this protest march. The dissident march is scheduled to begin in West Belfast (away from the SF gathering). Since this group did not request permission from the Parades Commission, the police will not allow them to march and will arrest anyone trying to participate in this "illegal" demonstration. This could lead to a confrontation and violence because the PSNI has intelligence that dissidents may have small petrol bombs and hand guns.

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COMMENT  
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¶ 17. (C) The British Defence Ministry apparently believed after a year of devolved government that a military parade could take place in Belfast without incident. However, its parade has resurrected the anger and distrust that the republican community felt towards the British military. As a result SF leadership felt compelled to hold a counterdemonstration. With relations between the DUP and SF already strained due to differing opinions on how to devolve policing and justice, the extensive media coverage of the outrage from both sides has not been helpful. While the parade controversy has damaged cross-community relations, peaceful parades by the military and SF on November 2 will demonstrate that Northern Ireland's political leaders and majority of the population do not want to return to the violence of the past.

ELLIOTT